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AUTHOR Das, Ajit K.
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ABSTRACT

Research has sought to establish a connection between positive psychological state and physical health and longevity. It has been suggested that persons with a sense of purpose or meaning in life are better able to withstand stress, and enjoy better health. To study the link between a sense of meaning and a sense of physical well-being, 28 college students (8 male and 17 female) completed the Purpose in Life Test, a 20-item test using a 7-point rating scale; and the Life Regard Index, a 24-item self-report measure. Sense of well-being was measured by a self-anchoring scale in which subjects indicated their own well-being on a ten step ladder. Intercorrelations were obtained between the three sets of scores to see if a relationship existed. Scores were also analyzed in relation to age and sex. Although there were some limitations imposed by the testing instruments, tentative results indicated that: (1) there was a positive correlation between a sense of meaning in life and a sense of well-being; (2) students with a higher sense of meaning or purpose had a higher sense of well-being; and (3) among college students, males and females differed significantly in their sense of well-being, with males reporting higher levels of well-being. The findings suggest that a sense of meaning for college students stems from having a purpose or a goal in life, having some kind of philosophical conception of how one should live one's life, and a sense that one is actually living according to this conception of life. These results have implications for counselors who would be in a position to help clients find or extend the meaning in their lives. (JAC)

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MEANINGFULNESS AS A FACTOR IN HEALTH

A Research Paper

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Ajit K. Das
Associate Professor
University of Minnesota
Duluth

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Meaningfulness of Life as a Factor in Health

It has been known for some time that our psychological states (feelings, emotions and thoughts) affect our physical health. The whole concept of psychosomatic illness has been predicated on that idea. The so-called diseases of stress (peptic ulcer, essential hypertension, coronary heart disease) are supposed to be the body's reaction to prolonged stress.

More recently, it has been suggested that psychological factors are involved not only in a limited number of disorders which have been called psychosomatic disorders up to now, but in all physical illness, to a certain extent. The latest classification of psychiatric disorders (DSM III), developed by the American Psychiatric Association, recognizes that viewpoint and, therefore, does not provide a separate category for psychosomatic disorders. Instead, the diagnostic procedure requires that possible psychogenic factors in physical illness be noted separately.

Paralleling the work that led to the recognition of the link between negative psychological states such as fear, anxiety. and despair and physical illness, there has been a more slowly developing line of work that has sought to establish a connection between positive psychological states and physical health and longevity (Pelletier, 1977). Out of this work, one factor has emerged as being of crucial importance. It is described variously as a sense of purpose or meaning in life, a form of religious faith, a philosophy of life, or simply as a sense of coherence (Frankl, 1967; Antonovsky, 1979). It has been proposed that persons who have a sense of purpose or meaning in life are able to withstand stressful conditions better by mobilizing the body's general resources for resistance to stress. Because these people are able to tolerate adverse conditions better, they enjoy better health and live longer. A certain amount of evidence has been found to support this viewpoint.

Purpose of the Study: The current study was undertaken to find further evidence for the proposed link between a sense of meaning and a feeling of physical well being. It was hypothesized that persons who report a greater sense of meaning or purpose in life will also report a higher sense of physical well being.

Subjects: The subjects were college students in an upper division psychology class. Altogether there were 28 subjects (8 male and 17 female), ranging in age from 21 to 36.

Instruments: Two instruments were used to measure meaning:

(a) The Purpose in Life Test (PIL) developed by James Crumbaugh and Leonard Maholick (1964). It is based on Frankl's work on meaning. The PIL is a 20 item questionnaire on which the subject rates each question on a 7 point rating scale. On each item, points 1 and 7 describe opposite ends of a continuum and point 4 describes a neutral position. For example: item #1 reads: "I am usually: 1. completely bored _2 _3 _4 _5 _6 _7, exuberantly enthusiastic" The PIL has been widely used in research.

(b) The Life Regard Index (LRI). The Life Regard Index is also a self report instrument. There are 24 items to which the subject responds by indicating his/her agreement or disagreement.

The items are divided into Framework items and Fulfillment items. The framework items deal with ideas about one's philosophy of life. The fulfillment items deal with the extent to which one is actually living according to one's philosophy as expressed in the framework items. In order to control for response bias, half of items of each kind are worded positively and half negatively. The test was developed by John Battista and Richard Almond (1973)

The sense of well-being (W-B) was measured by means of a self-anchoring scale (Allport, 1961). Subjects were presented with a ten-step ladder-like diagram (shown in Figure 1 below) and were asked to imagine the

Figure 1 - Self-anchoring scale for measuring sense of well-being.

10 Highest level
_____
_____ 9
_____ 8
_____ 7
_____ 6
_____ 5
_____ 4
_____ 3
_____ 2
_____ 1 Lowest level

lowest and the highest levels of well being and represent these two extreme points by the first and the tenth rungs of the ladder. Then, they were asked to indicate, using these two reference points, their current level of well-being.

Procedure: All three measures were collected on the same day within an hour with brief rest intervals between one measure and another. The tests were scored by hand and the data was analyzed in two steps, using a computer program.

First, intercorrelations among the three sets of scores were obtained in order to see if any relationship existed among the dimensions represented by these scores.

Next, in order to test the hypotheses that:

a. subjects scoring high on the Purpose in Life Test will also score high on the measure of well being, and

b. subjects scoring high on the Life Regard Index will score high on the measure of well-being, the following procedure was followed.

In addition, the scores on the three sets of measures were also analyzed in relation to two demographic variables, namely, age and sex. Intercorrelation of age with scores on PIL, LRI and W-B were determined. In regard to sex, the difference in the mean scores of males and females on each of the three measures was tested by a t-test.

Results:

Intercorrelation Among Variable:

The intercorrelations among the different variables are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Intercorrelation coefficients

	Age	PIL	LRI	W-B
Age		-.10	-.19	-.30
PIL			.53**	.37*
LRI				.61**

**P < .01 *p < .05

The figures in Table 1 indicate that the two measures of meaning used in this study are positively correlated. Both of the measures of meaning are also positively correlated with the measure of well-being. All three coefficients of correlation are statistically significant, two at the .01 level and one at the .05 level. Age seems to be negatively correlated with the measure of meaning used as well as with measure of well-being, although none of the coefficients of correlation were statistically significant.

Sex Differences:

Means and standard deviations of the scores obtained by males and females on the measures of meaning and the measure of well-being, together with results of the t-test, are shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Means, SDS and Results of the t-test

		Mean	N	S.D	t	Degrees of Freedom
PIL	Male	105.37	8	9.65	.07	23
	Female	105	17	12.68		
LRI	Male	9.25	8	3.73	.77	23
	Female	7.64	17	5.28		
W-B	Male	8.25	8	.70		
	Female	7.29	17	1.10	2.23*	23

* p < .05

Data in Table 2 shows that only on the measure of well being, the mean scores obtained by males and females differ significantly. Males seem to report a slightly higher sense of well-being.

Results of the Mann-Whitney U Test:

Results of the Mann-Whitney U test as applied to the ranks of the subjects on the Purpose-in-Life test and their ranks on the measure of well-being are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Mann-Whitney U test (PIL by W-B)

PIL	Mean Rank	N	U	Z
Hi Group	10.61	14		-1.9185
Lo Group	16.05	11	43.5*	

*p < .05 (one tailed test)

Results of the Mann-Whitney U test applied to the ranks on Purpose-in-Life test and the ranks on the measure of well-being shown in Table 3 indicate that the two sets of ranks are significantly positively correlated. This confirmed our first hypothesis that persons who score high on the Purpose-in-Life Test will report higher levels of well-being.

The results of the Mann-Whitney U test applied to the ranks of the subjects on Life Regard Index and their ranks on the measure of well-being are shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Mann-Whitney U test (LRI by W-B)

	Mean Rank	N	U	Z
LRI				
Hi Group	9.62	13	34.0*	-2.50*
Lo Group	16.67	12		

*p < .01 (one tailed test)

The data in Table 4 indicates that the ranks of the subjects on the Life Regard Index and their ranks on the measure of well-being are positively correlated to a statistically significant extent. These results confirmed our second hypothesis second hypothesis that persons who score high on Life Regard Index will report higher levels of well-being.

Discussion:

Although the results of this study are in line with theoretical expectations, and are in agreement with the finding of other research in this area, meaningfulness of life is, of necessity, defined by the instruments used to measure it. One of the instruments (Purpose-in-Life Test), although widely used in research, has been strongly criticized for lack of conceptual clarity, bias toward certain middle class values such as emphasis on goal directed behavior, future orientation and an active stance toward life (Yalom, 1980). The other instrument (Life Regard Index) has been more carefully developed, but has not been used in research, so we do not know much about its psychometric properties. The extent to which the measure of well being was subject

to the social desirability bias is not known. It is reasonable to believe that social desirability does influence response on a self report instrument of this kind. Another possible confounding factor might have been the interpretation of "well being" largely in psychological terms rather than in a physical sense as intended.

Besides the limitations of the measuring instruments, the size of the sample, and its relative homogeneity in terms of age, and social class impose further limitations on the generalizability of the results. Despite these limitations, however, the results of the study point to certain interesting relationships that need to be explored further with more powerful instruments and different populations. The problem of finding meaning in life is faced by every individual. It is a multi-faceted problem and hence needs to be approached from many different angles.

Conclusions and Implications:

Keeping in mind the limitations of the study stated above, the following tentative conclusions may be drawn from its results.

1. There is a positive correlation between a sense of meaning in life and a sense of well being.
2. In general, college students who have a higher sense of meaning or purpose in life have a higher sense of well being.
3. Among college students, males and females differ significantly in their sense of well being, with males reporting higher levels of well being.
4. A sense of meaning for college students stems from having a purpose or a goal in life, having some kind of philosophical conception of how one should live one's life, and a sense that one is actually living according to this conception of life.

Implications for counselors:

Meanings play a very important role in the psychological economy of the individual. They are related to values, motivation, morale, and as this study indicates, the sense of well-being. Until recently, issues relating to the existence or lack of meaning did not receive much attention from psychologists. This was partly due to the dominance of behavioral psychology, and partly to the way in which questions relating to meaning were traditionally formulated e.g. what is the meaning of life? In this form the question is obviously metaphysical and cannot be answered by science.

More recently, under the influence of existential psychology, the questions relating to meaning have been reformulated, so that now one can ask "Under what condition does a person experience his or her life as meaningful"? "What gives meaning to a human life?", "What kind of experiences destroy the sense of meaning?", "What are the consequences of experiencing ones life as full of meaning, or alternatively, as devoid of meaning?".

It seems reasonable to believe that all these questions about meaning would be of more than casual interest to counselors. Furthermore, those who have thought through these questions, and have looked at the recent literature that addresses these questions, will be in a better position to help their clients to find or extend meaning in their lives.

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